Professionalization of Airport Security Screening Checkpoint Operations

Summary

After the full recovery of the global aviation industry from the pandemic, a renewed focus on aviation security is essential for ensuring safe, regular, efficient and economical worldwide air transport operations. States should seize this opportunity to professionalize their airport security screening checkpoint operations, yielding measurable benefits for the industry, the travelling public, and governments. The analysis and arguments presented should serve as a basis for States to consult their industry representatives and consider possible improvements in the national security systems.

Background

1. Achieving a high and sustainable standard of aviation security requires a dedicated, professional screening force at airport checkpoints, regulated by an Appropriate Authority. In some States, passenger security checkpoint screening is still conducted by personnel from the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defence. When such senior government departments provide the screening force, the Appropriate Authority, likely the Ministry of Transport or Civil Aviation Authority, finds it politically challenging to fulfill its oversight obligations as outlined in Annex 17 of the Chicago Convention.

2. Police and military personnel manning security checkpoints, unless part of a dedicated, specialised force, often lack the appropriate training, civil aviation background knowledge, and international threat awareness required for effective performance in a role that is arguably civil based, compared to law enforcement or national defence functions. Additionally, in many of these States, criticism of any police or military function, whether constructive or not, is often illegal and treated as a criminal case.

3. The challenges often result in limited and poor aviation security performance at checkpoints, delivered by an agency neither suited to nor properly prepared for the task. The Appropriate Authority lacks the political empowerment to regulate it, and airport management and airlines are legally restrained from offering constructive criticism or performing quality assurance. International passenger sentiment surveys frequently cite poor and lengthy security procedures. Simple changes can quickly remedy a situation where a political and legal stalemate almost invariably ensures poor aviation security.

Defining Better Roles

4. Certain security functions at an airport are best handled by law enforcement and national defence agencies, such as performing background checks, preventing terrorist acts and organised crime through a deterrent presence beyond and around the airport perimeter, within terminals, and at cargo, general aviation, and other facilities. These functions could also include supporting the checkpoint screening force if a passenger poses a threat or commit a criminal offence.

5. These high-end counterterrorist (CT) security functions are rightly the preserve of the police and military. Airport passenger checkpoint screening, while vital to an overall CT-based security plan, is better suited to a properly regulated civilian organisation due to its repetitive and sustained nature, not forgetting the operational effectiveness aspects while performing repetitive tasks with the view to reducing queues, thus potential targets for potential landside terrorist attacks, even before the first security checks.

6. This paper[1] contends that checkpoint screening should **not** be a function for regular police or military units. Instead, a professional, dedicated civilian-developed capability, answerable in terms of regulatory oversight to the Appropriate Authority and potentially commercially to airport operators, should be contracted to deliver such functions under a Service Level Agreement (SLA).

7. The Appropriate Authority, tasked by national legislation to deliver internationally agreed standards in primary aviation security measures and controls, is responsible for ensuring that checkpoint screening meets (and ideally surpasses under high-risk conditions) those baseline standards. This requires regulating the implementation of security checkpoint measures, ensuring personnel are properly vetted and trained, incentivised to perform their duties correctly, and that their organisational security culture sustains high performance and uncompromisable security for civil aviation for the best effectiveness.

Common Benefits

8. Limiting law enforcement and defence agencies to roles that better fit their primary function has obvious benefits, freeing up considerable human and financial resources. This allows staff to be released from checkpoint screening duties to fulfill their primary function and enables these agencies to continue taking responsibility for certain aspects of airport security, as outlined in an SLA with the airport operator.

9. Contracting a screening entity genuinely regulated by the Appropriate Authority and quality assured by the airport and airlines produces clear benefits in terms of the standard and sustainability of aviation security. It allows for a proper relationship to develop, free of political considerations, leading to mutual agreement on exceeding Treaty-mandated standards.

10. This proposal is not a call for the complete privatisation of the screening force at all airports. There are government personnel, both civilian and military, who currently form dedicated and effective aviation security forces. What sets them apart is their professional attitude and approach to protective security outcomes.

11. Professionalizing civil aviation screening forces could enhance global aviation security standards, enabling Contracting States to discuss bilateral, regional, and multinational agreements that reduce the need to re-screen passengers, cabin, and hold baggage in transit or transfer.

12. Such collaborative arrangements, known as ICAO-defined Recognition of Equivalence (RoE), or also One Stop Security (OSS), could significantly enhance the movement of passengers and their baggage through transfer points, allowing airports to review their real estate when transit and transfer checkpoints are removed, benefiting all involved. In also helps in allocating human resources where they are most needed, such as at departure.

Making the Changes

13. Airport operators and regulators should also consider introducing Security Management System (SeMS) principles into professionalized screening organisations. Applying the basic key elements of SeMS can lead to innovative, adaptable, and motivated checkpoint operators, essential for a Contracting State's recovery and growth strategies for its civil aviation sector.

14. SeMS can only function if an effective Security Culture exists within the organisation, an element that received particular attention and promotion by ICAO, States and the Industry since a decade.

15. Security Culture and the application of human capability are priority issues identified in ICAO's Global Aviation Security Plan (GASeP), underpinning the framework for enhanced security performance agreed by Contracting States. However, USAP-CMA results on checkpoint screening indicate a relatively poor level of effective implementation with States not meeting required minimum standards.

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[1] initially prepared in March 2022 by IATA with the assistance of the Aviation Risk Management Advisory Panel (ARM-AP), a small group of retired aviation security experts previously based within industry or government in several countries. (See http://www.arm-ap.com for further details).

Costing

16. Financial recompense is crucial for successful engagement in aviation and airport security. Offering only the minimum wage required by domestic legislation arguably prevents the professionalization of screening personnel, reducing the prospects for high, sustainable and efficient implementation of aviation security standards.

17. Proper compensation for law enforcement and checkpoint personnel can be achieved through terms set out in an SLA, a commercial services contract, and/or clear policy on how aeronautical fees are applied. Several models exist for recouping capital and operational security costs at an airport, and Contracting States should choose the model that best suits their purposes and fiscal policy.

18. Most national authorities and/or airport operators apply a passenger security surcharge, which airlines capture when passengers make bookings. Continuing to use traditional law enforcement and military personnel for primary Annex 17 measures often results in a less transparent application of aviation fees.

19. Effective security should be available and reliable at the required surge volumes, and those who benefit from it should be willing to pay for it.

Next Steps

20. States and industry should consider continuing the promotion of security culture, systems risk management approach, and reinforcing the professionalization of specific aviation security functions.